

# Tony Towle

# Selected Poems

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## The Review

The magic month of June, when I was born.  
Ducklings take their first swim in a nearby pond,  
roses and strawberries grow wild;  
the summer begins to vibrate  
with portents of riot and jailbreak.  
By October the parks and fields are full of fog,  
as though there were clouds on the ground,  
instead of in the sky. In October  
there is a lot of smoke. One goes up with it  
to the noonday sun, or disappears with it  
into the late afternoon.

Things are established by July. The floors of the houses  
are spread with rushes; our machines have worked themselves  
to exhausted perfection. But I am not thinking about that;  
I am thinking that we roll across the sky like the planets;  
the sun shines on us as on them; ants and beetles  
go quietly along the ground, and every day we sleep.

2

He is pried loose, but soon he is back, clinging to the bed.  
First is the mother; then there are friends  
and a number of women. The roads and highways are lined with  
flowers; there are hundreds of hotels and castles. Spring,  
in the castles, is a brilliant burst of color and gaiety; one  
is hardly aware of the surrounding rhythm of life. We only know  
that on the following day there will be the same delightful  
things to do and that nothing will ever change.

3

The snow covers all the earth, falling faster and faster.  
We think sadly of the trees and the sunshine, the clouds  
and the flowers. We go peacefully to sleep,  
first one side toward the sun, then the other.

The sun rolls down the sky in the afternoon  
and drops into the sea with a restful hiss.  
The woods are calm and safe. A flurry of snow  
comes in the daytime, while we are walking.

## Poem

An engineer pushes a button in the mountains,  
and another mountain lifts itself  
and slides into the lake,  
revealing a patchwork of interesting minerals.  
The air follows us as we walk along.

Look at all this junk. My glass is cracked suddenly.  
Look at the punch leaking out onto my sleeve.  
That is the way I see things,  
that, or locked up in storage bins, alongside one another  
and hanging from my tie as from a dangling rope,  
ending up in the same intrigue of thoughts,  
becoming a digestible poison,  
and the nerve-endings evolved to cope with danger  
do not know what to tell the brain, so they think about it.

Back in the mountains. The engineer pulls a switch,  
and a mountain,  
making a quiet, sliding sound, lifts itself  
and slides into the lake.  
There is bound to be a breeze now,  
we are a hundred feet in the air.  
There is no shock, just a quick vibrant lift.  
The air comes with us,  
a warm halo of fog and icy water with no sense of motion.

## Elegy

We eat and hear as your kiss descends  
over the piano and the sky.  
The tide rushes out of a box and I am dead.  
Prokofiev is dead, as I am.  
On the day of judgment, when we are released,  
we will hear the rain and the thunder  
and miles of cars will stop in their tracks.  
The line down the highway is white,  
the color of the sky before Prokofiev.  
At the beginning I am here behind the typewriter.  
I wander off to the cliffs to see the sharks  
looking for a finger or some bloody popcorn or a ruined doll.  
I throw them a ruined doll.  
The camera moves in for a close-up. I adjust my tie  
but it focuses on my cigarettes, Pall Mall Filters,  
and the shining gold pack that contains them.  
The camera goes on across the crowd.  
We have five seconds on camera, a daguerreotype,  
the room is upside down and objects fall with a crash.  
Then a picture of an airplane.  
The airplane or the sun is upside down.  
It is the sun, which falls like an egg onto a plateau.  
The real sun burns it to a disgusting omelet.  
The sun also drains the color from the words; the moon  
turns them to chalk and they collapse.



You open your eyes, the gentlemen disperse,  
 each to a situation  
 you will investigate when you are rested,  
 with mixed feelings and time for contemplation,  
 and things falling, in slow motion from the window, into place,  
 as falling from the highest place imagined  
 in the coming moment, has produced the effect of falling now,  
 and shows what is an orange falling from its place,  
 with later others, in disorder, also falling,  
 and the orange has fallen, into the water,  
 and we are free to see it disappear,  
 and unencumbered we go to the nearest place that is comfortable.

The idea stops, halts, abruptly.  
 A friend may enter the room, happy and alive,  
 talking, and you listen but you are not sure.  
 You stand and listen.  
 We will feel better with the conversation tomorrow,  
 understanding it differently and admiringly,  
 the words growing dense and great. When their greatness diffuses  
 we notice the colors of paint. Their delicate use astounds us,  
 the silver hue at the top remaining that color  
 as we wade, intoxicated with the warmth of the water,  
 the group of figures at the front, the bottom, conveying  
 the infinite satisfaction their presence makes possible,  
 delighting us with the colorless air they breathe,  
 stirring the breathtaking length of our trip like a fluid.

In the morning we are set in rows and given problems. Who  
 finishes quickly is given one more, more complicated,  
 until finally things are perfected and we disperse, as  
 gentlemen, having started with nothing and excelled in everything,  
 our projects and accomplishments nearby in the light,  
 illuminating our successive details.

There is a thought. The light is excluded from the trees  
 and the group of people are fools, departing, leaving  
 a woman, naked and pensive, near a cloud, and  
 watching it from the distant side of a space  
 covered with inches of water. She turns her head,  
 thinking, as I write, crossing her mind.

## **After Dinner We Take a Drive into the Night**

We are watching for someplace to eat. We feel we are prey  
for the insane scavengers of the air. We cannot make up our minds  
and race five hundred miles away from our hosts.

I begin to feel passion.  
I walk back and forth and it is a slow movie,  
without the interest of acting, only walking.  
Far from my prying eyes she strips off her clothes.  
Oh for the wings of a bird.

The record slows down;  
sweat falls on the instruments;  
the musicians are bored.  
A hand comes from the clouds to give me a poem.  
I accept it and we shake hands.

The incident with the hand haunted me for the rest of my life.  
I began to gasp. It is time to sing the death song,  
clearing the tops of the trees, hearing the glass  
from the window and the traffic from the street.  
Each year is a supermarket; no, each year is captured by a word,  
repeated with nostalgia, overwhelmed by ineptitude,  
dropping to the ground and rolling down the bowling alley of the sky.



## **New York**

*for Irma*

A peaceful bite of hamburger and your mind is blown into space,  
going on for some time while the long roots of space  
dig into your language and the fuel pitches its tents and talks to you.

You escape from this passively and pay the check. Your mind  
is occupied, backing across the Brooklyn Bridge,  
the serenity of the city to blind you with the sun,  
and going through you into Brooklyn Heights.

It is April as you keep from bursting. In Córdoba and Seville  
the churches enclose you and you think what you wish.

On Fifth Avenue you combine the words and cross the street,  
between or among the starry buildings.

If the moon rises you will see the city.

You exhale and ideas fall from your mouth. The vowels are raised  
and become diphthongs and soon you are speaking Modern English,  
fighting the Germans, pressured into study and learning,  
crowding into the forest of tables to eat.

## Agon

Rays of color come in with the rain.  
There is the world, a chord is struck, and death: from  
hemisphere to hemisphere, to join the presumptuous fallen,  
with mythical figures, out of proportion, over us.

The kindly storekeeper stops, in love at last,  
and able to see how difficult and important it is,  
but this helpless sufferer is deserted, in my imagination,  
as I rise with the ferment which comes in the myths from the past;  
the sun, the stars, the moon, the circles around the earth,  
and the sky that hovers above in the darkness,  
all adding their backgrounds to my invention.

I get up, and the apocalypse in my room  
has been carted away, the cough from the past  
fallen dead on the floor, the symbolic death of metaphor;  
and I drift back to sleep, fitfully in New York,  
from where it is useless to try to escape.

## Fable

1

It begins to get dark, the foggy air gets chilly.  
We take the jar and descend from the hills.  
Here are some pebbles. We put them in the jar.  
We find a necktie, and put it around the jar.  
The jar is wearing a tie. The jar speaks:

*I remember the turnips in the field.  
I remember the creatures eating and eating.*

A rooster crows. Flies buzz. The jar  
will receive its reward.

2

The years go by. Many people are saved  
and many fall into the ravine.  
Some people are handsome and some  
are as ugly as trolls. Robert sighs:

*There is no reason for me to work. They  
lead me through the gate and up the sidewalk.  
In my basement home I go to the darkest corner, the  
red woollen blanket around me, repose my hands, and sleep.*

## **Barbarossa**

The cold needle of day goes through the sun and into your finger,  
through the heat of your hand and into the sea to cool.

I do not imply dreariness in this month of December,  
the towers of Manhattan snow are there in the mist  
and one breathes softly in the floating noise,  
through the silence and cold brought in by the summer,  
into the veins as the oceans recede,  
as we lie on the beach with the minutes and sand,  
flowing back to the giant space from which we came.

## Osiris

The muse's perfume drifts across the keys;  
she is in the room promising a caress,  
a draft alive within my ear,  
an air of coolness and drowsy inertia.

A sprite, a messenger of the muse,  
flies above the swelling earth,  
her watery swarms of intoxication  
in showers of bees on our scattered parts,  
strewn in a system of earliest simplicity.

In the blank moments of the day and night  
the blood of divinity rushes our senses,  
surrounding our breathless repose  
on land come up from the sea to dry  
with nothing familiar begun to exist.

Old in our dream familiar things spring up.  
A truck rolls forward stringing wire,  
the dizzy feel of the empty sky,  
a woman naked and arched,  
falling so that I enter without limit.

## Poem

The last idiot elegy, a beer  
dries over my hand as if I breathe  
an evaporation not a woman  
with its implications of a sigh  
going up to poetic clouds  
in a billowing smoke of triumph,  
the speeding Nebraska plains  
of a hill distant and opportune  
in the throat, a typical thing  
to choke on.

To grow with the restive prices  
and talk through the march of real estate,  
the adhesive blue of the eye  
which raises the spinning earth  
and the beauty coming easily from you  
before your eyes to balance your stare  
is only the subway on the last day  
before the year begins to stir  
to lift you awake and scheming  
into its limits.

And you return  
where the celebrated deepening of your wish  
yearns for desire in luxury,  
in the composition of sitting down,  
the transparent allegory of tears  
for the insufferable humanity of art.

## Poem

Here we all are, painting, poetry, and music,  
having a soda at our favorite fountain,  
talking away and bloated with triumph:  
for with bouquets and calling for another drink  
we have won, the unfortunate century  
redeemed by our sensibilities.

But remember that you are writing poetry,  
and when the past wells up with its veil  
it is only a line running before another,  
and the draft from approaching January  
a device to fill you with winter,  
as the streets when someone dies are pages  
and the television brings you to a quiet world.

## **The Allegorical Figure of Brooklyn**

The Allegorical Figure of Brooklyn is right here,  
there where you're standing, and here's how it works:  
the lamps go on and we walk through miles of parks;  
the rain and the sleet are brought on; we travel  
to Queens for two weeks of vacation; the sun returns  
and the grass and farms, the villages of Brooklyn  
continue to grow, and the spacious terrace and oily  
sand of Brooklyn breathe, and are rocked slowly  
by the Figure, and back toward home on the BMT  
we smile at the tender Figure and wave goodbye.



## Sunrise: Ode to Frank O'Hara

The gulls glide, in 1939, into the bonus of another country,  
the balloons and machinery of all the Europes and Americas,  
a hundred million thoughts at rest in the river,  
stirring, as I begin to think about myself,  
and in the history of my ears making a beginning of the frontier.

Ah the complete bunker of the earth and its dirt flying up,  
across our view at the peak of the centuries,  
pauses and silence as subtle as the wines of Bordeaux, and as words  
coming time after time before the vigilance of your dizzying indulgence.

An incredible weight hangs today from my evasions;  
you, and my biography, which gets a little endless,  
your immortal heart disappearing endlessly in the crisis,  
slowly to be clear and quickly to be interesting,  
as we stay in the tonic of the bad air.

So what is the distinction of the river drawing you forward,  
away from the restiveness of a vast American poetry  
you created with an unfathomable love?  
You will be with the few of the past great enough to talk to,  
as the remainder of this century of poetry begins to suffer  
and your work bursts repeatedly our silence of unbearable memory.

August and then December will close the century  
O air of your dreams descending on my day off.

## North

The green figures move forward and the objects grow larger,  
explorers of the sky, exploring the earth immersed in water,  
1967 with its fatal look of artificial brevity,  
your life as if an illusion putting you near the window  
and promptly all the winds and currents rustle the curtains.

The humid surroundings, a transparent lizard  
under the leaves and stretching its rubberlike self  
across the room, protruding with our European selves,  
show that we valiantly dig at the ground, poise  
on the brink of adventure, or blister the flatulent sky.  
In other words you are held, amused, peacefully in the grass  
O beautiful art springing to mind, as we are the supreme judges.

Or perhaps you have forgotten an important exaggerated phrase,  
and your words spread over the stones in a pure pool of the specific  
and you speak only the names of the bellowing animals, plants and trees  
which, blind, you touch; ships, insects peopling the forests, et cetera.  
The labyrinth speaks from its precipice, its outline shoots in a curve  
through the chemical air, in addition to writing the script.

O miracles of divine reaches and language spinning from infancy  
and whose business and indispensable references are not known,  
your story is truly a story to treasure, distilled intoxicant that it is,  
saying that I am a synonym for the relaxed and drifting universe,  
a mere summary holding my attention over the thundering firmament.

## For Irma during April

Now it is April, then the great bull of May,  
and then it will be my birthday and time for presents and the beach.  
That's when the poetry of summer descends on you  
if you are a poet, and the metaphors emit an enormous heat,  
tapering off to the luxuriant melancholy verse of fall.  
Then 1968 and my vote for president, and January 1969 and '70. By  
this time my poetry improves, a compliment to the new administration.  
I suppose that other people's poetry will also have improved,  
worse luck, and there will be new painters and paintings  
and a host of movies I won't keep track of,  
or as Johnson said of Pope: considering the English climate,  
what would an Englishman want with a grotto?  
As an American I should enjoy a grotto.  
The walls would be fragrant with the spirits of the earth,  
and in general be like a symphony by Shostakovich,  
very entertaining, a vodka and tonic made with Russian vodka.  
The clocks' stopping means I'm waiting for you to get home;  
dinner and the television of Sherlock Holmes and Watson  
shaping our evening with Hollywood precision.  
Beautiful cinematography and the pork chops this April  
since they're yours and with the curtains drawn  
spring in the area is a more delightful place in which to be.

## George Towle

We put our heads here, and see nothing but beautiful yellow flowers.  
We notice them because they are a different color,  
having just come from a green so extraordinary  
that we could have been there forever.  
Previously we discovered the intensity of red,  
asea with carnations and tulips. It is no matter  
that you are oblivious, you are already there,  
fitting into a number of years;  
the sun revolves in its glory,  
the animals bite the grass;  
and when they are fat we will bite *them*,  
chasing them over the hills to work up our appetites.  
The bluejay flies overhead, the frog keeps pace with you on the ground;  
the antelope runs before and the lion behind.  
It is Friday on the gilded path to the bank with these creatures,  
the clear magnificent river and paper one fords to cash one's check,  
the lettuce you buy for the rabbits, or the birds  
beating their wings to a standstill over the rooftops  
in the effort poem after poem to be somewhere else,  
and to say nothing about it in the attempt to support yourself;  
to scatter your sense among the planets  
which you notice are all the same color  
like the dishes washing themselves in the kitchen  
which you notice because you are in the same room  
which is variable as you drink forever.

## 14<sup>th</sup> Street

You learn new things every week.  
You go nowhere in the way that you expect.  
Awash on the streets you save money on linens and shirts.  
You count and examine your change.  
Something hideous falls on you, as from a great height.  
For if you insist on writing there will be these shapes  
throughout an evening, beginning with poetry  
and ending at the bottom of a slope of critical prose.

Sure I don't have anything to do with the moon  
because boring people will land there,  
nothing to do with the century  
except to swallow its apple of sophistication,  
difficult but no wider than a stopping train  
running by the houses and killing the grass  
here on Long Island where you walk around  
and have not seen the moon for so long  
in the haphazard temerity of keeping awake.

But even so, on an infinite train of thought  
you look to your syntax for an exquisite mist,  
the flowers of Park Avenue Madison Avenue  
which like your suit are covered with a thin film.

## Macy's

At long last, as the search for impressions continues,  
a letter from a company, in this capacious month,  
with a remonstrance that really moves me;  
and with scalding exactitude, like being calm  
before one's only and tremendous possibility.

It is the inner chamber of the year, June,  
the risen buildings filled with a summer transparency,  
open doors and sliding windows,  
and tubes for the warm and cool life-giving air  
to support the activity within.

In these surroundings one grows dignified and luxurious,  
neither young by the standards of America  
nor middle-aged by the standards of middle age.  
We hurry about, each with a simple expression of tragedy,  
each with a different style and theme.

In the buildings 1967 has been the year of the pervert,  
silly instead of eloquent, amused instead of elated,  
and since you like dot dot dot, fill in the blank,  
you're as much of a pervert as anyone,  
waiting for the Greenport train,  
waiting for the Montauk train,  
you permit only what goes with your life,  
and understand the summer by wearing a tie in August.  
You ignore it by crossing Houston Street with everyone else,  
comparing it to the coming of autumn.  
You feel horny instead of longing  
and irritable instead of melancholy.  
There are times when the rumbling subway  
zeroes in for a serious conclusion,  
and times when 16th-century dandyism of language  
is the most important thing, my little pancake,  
though real people walk in the cold air and birds fly in it.

## The City in the Throes of Despair

The great worm of the north, in whose footsteps we tread,  
eludes us with a thousand lightnings.

However the bus, the nourishment of the city, pulls in,  
and nothing has been accomplished though beauty  
interrupts constantly, interpolating a row of moments  
like a pink balustrade basking in the sun.

The buses and planes go forward in clouds of yeast and salt,  
lurching over the pipes and turbines of the city  
as Wyoming would slide down the coast of Norway  
and I look from the plane as from the vantage point of a roof  
to see the Lefrak Building shielding my eyes from Manhattan.  
Lefrak, whose first name has escaped me — like Catherine  
the Great's last — into the wild blue,  
but who with Moses, whose first name is an anticlimax,  
has left us the Queens of today and tomorrow.

We surprise the great worm in the frozen waste of his sleep.  
Our magic ax and feather do their work  
and the monster lies helpless in scattered and giggling pieces.  
The five boroughs are safe and rainbows arch over the brick,  
bright birds with their pinions are free to range once more,  
but in whose colorful wake our hurtling plane seems spiritless,  
planning to touch only Chicago and perhaps Detroit,  
with a landing in the meantime however subtle meaning an emergency,  
with no one congenial until reaching the ground, parachutes billowing,  
and relaxing on the train back to New York, the parachute as a souvenir.

## The Country Life

1

The lion roars his possibilities over the phone,  
and is himself the possibility that one does not  
see things clearly after months of the sun and the moon  
alternating the horizon with euphemisms;  
the silver cup of the past, clattering,  
the paper cup of the present,  
the elegant plastic goblet of the future  
in the far crummy distance of magazines  
waiting for weeks and crowds to run off at the mouth;  
headaches in the afternoon,  
the darkened museum of streets at evening,  
a quick bounce into the brief country air for recovery,  
where American as I am I send up my words to the presidents:

*O sexual drunkenness of the Twenties,  
Corny proletarianism of the Thirties,  
Carmen Miranda movies of the Forties,  
Adolescent sadism of the Fifties,  
Mindless pacifism of the Sixties, Negroes  
losing their humor and forming their Mafia,  
the comic improvements of the Seventies on television,  
the turn of the century and beyond,  
when archaic English will be gleaned from our lives  
where they float in the carbonized air.*

The presidents ignore my vocatives. They saw  
that I was not obstreperous enough to write  
when the first for whom I voted was shot through the neck  
on television and by word of mouth.

But I have an answer for everything.

And news comes to life; I see it and hear it. The fires  
rage or don't rage and doubt  
burns in any event. You read poetry or don't read it,  
pleased with your sensitivity in any event,  
finding energy for your life in some way as the air waits for the dawn  
on 1st September to give it breath for a month,  
and again for October. After 40, one becomes a lecher,  
period. But how can you doubt that we will meet and love forever  
on some great enormity of clouds?



The bacon too carries on its modest love affair.  
 When it is tired of eggs, we insert hors d'oeuvres, muffins,  
 waffles, and sandwiches. The bacon too sits by the sea  
 in a coating of ancient sand. The bacon, it must be admitted,  
 is soon washed away legless with the tide, and the sun goes down  
 in the country life not knowing what is to be produced.  
 And you, on vacation in nervous retirement in the Nineties,  
 some of you admirable and some despicable,  
 decades of adequate jobs and salaries, an apartment  
 or house and someone to live with you,  
 children to keep you aware of the time,  
 and after years of essays and scriptwriting,  
 you speak at last from massy age to a sea of admiring faces,  
 one of which gleams with an absolute adoration  
 and falls over the railing.  
 That's all I can say now about the Nineties  
 except Godspeed to its comeback in the Twenties.

I am still in the Sixties, however; the ivory gulls,  
 the gliding farmland, carrion, garbage, and eggs,  
 marine invertebrates — animals priding themselves on their lives  
 as they climb the trees and eat the leaves, live in cool springs,  
 under logs or stones, or in comfortable damp cavities in the earth.  
 There are many animals, as I walk in the silver night,  
 to whom I am reminiscent of something else.  
 Which occurs as the sea rolls over the weeds  
 in the coastal provinces,  
 each with its huddled poor and peculiar thoughts,  
 each thought a quest for searching minds.

We go back to our sautéed rainbow trout, or other fine dish;  
 we go back to our account books and taxes;  
 you will be ruined by 36, he says;  
 the fillet falls to the floor;  
 the fish it came from howls in the midnight void.  
 As far as going to bed with everyone goes  
 you climb some stairs and end at the curve of your skull.  
 As far as your American epic and talking to the presidents goes,  
 you went to the end and got off;  
 the Sixties are long uncorked and you are only  
 the basis for this eight o'clock and the good and the bad.

## Music

In the beginning nothing is congenial, not even the world  
not even your notes. In the middle many things are pleasant  
and even towards the end, but the end is self-explanatory,  
and full of asides and commas and people to clean up the room.  
Then you feel that Handel is truly your friend.  
His singers send you to glory,  
as his music is a preservative — for him, not you.

## Poets, Inc.

*for Kenward Elmslie*

The owl that I am leaves in a whoosh of classical euphuism  
for a nap in the grass of the morning sun  
and forgets that poems have to be exciting  
and that two days ago I didn't know what euphuism meant  
and now I know in the morning sun  
that my life has been a succulent euphuism.

By afternoon impressions are riding the crest,  
compassionate of small town life;  
kitchen fixtures and colorless posters  
descend from the air of clichés done to a turn.  
I tend to write of things descending from the air,  
but nothing relieves its microbiology.  
I think of Apollinaire, but what happens  
from Maine to Sacramento is politicians,  
and nothing from Wantagh to Bellmore but travel itself.

If I could stop and relate this all to prosody  
or a cohesive method, they would let go of me.  
If some intriguing yet traditional versification  
arrived, I could be on my way,  
suffused with the crimson light of the brain's hot blood  
but now I must sleep; some day I will write again.

## Poem

*for Frank Lima*

In beautiful English, in the same breath on the same day  
(English without a pure vowel to its name; even my voices,  
which are never wrong, slur their vowels to oblivion),  
we absorb the grueling climate of modern life,  
the anarchistic wings and rancid depths  
of its massive societal implications.

So we keep moving, from surrealistic symbolism  
to the dramatic allegory of symbolistic realism,  
or somewhere else in constellations of luminosity,  
on the way to true metaphorical existence,  
resembling neither twins nor archers nor crabs  
but a vivid provocative tentativeness, golden phlox  
to illumine the clammy humors of the body,  
and with cool imperturbable emotionalism  
invaginating the passive oaf of narration.

Though if we get flop-sweat now, writing in our youth,  
how will our nerves react when the laureateship  
is delivered to us — doddering, bloated with abstractions,  
propped by Parnassian phlegm — into our rheumy hands.  
Why don't we admit it, the wreath  
would stupefy the citric edges of our spleen,  
with possible fame at any rate booted asunder by the Novel,  
in its fatiguing quest for the ultimate poetic title,  
and at present among the elements we look for a sort of passage,  
in the wake of Science, the heads they have called and won  
but are not sublime, as the tails with which we will lose,  
which have not yet killed us and are not tails or news.

## Daybreak

The muse at daybreak, stuttering, informs my bed,  
pines in the scented winter air for poems,  
and mumbles about the government and whether I should vote:

"The government stinks; withhold your vote of red and white  
its hidden sea and blue of politic sky  
which clouds the world and so to surround our realm."

*Government* would speak as well, from the vales of Abstraction,  
who on the death of Pound will ramble on once more,  
their inbred grandeur making you feel like a shmuck.  
Milton of course could order these people around: God, Satan,  
Liberty, Progress and the rest. To me God might say:  
"You employ a distinctive style and I know who you are,  
but you are not illuminating for me,  
you do not give me any ideas, about Myself, or what I have done."

Satan: "Since you deal only with your own activity  
and with immeasurable vanity,  
I will eventually bring you something you dislike,  
and in phrase of unshakable metaphor  
as with that you think to spin out your life."

Satan concludes: "You will have more poems than you hope  
but more than you wish; your finger pressed to a difficult line,  
your tongue on occasion piercing a word's transparency,  
but my older tongue of iron comes inexorably to cover yours  
and in your future is of greater eloquence."

The day half gone, the muse and its servants fled,  
a sandwich gone through you in enormity to Philadelphia,  
cheese and milk flowing through you and into Boston,  
air on its way to Minneapolis.

## April 24th

Each year our group holds a ceremony  
at the grave of some great poet, singing  
and paying tribute to his memory  
for some great poems he has left to be read and remembered.  
Last spring, Edwin Denby, Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery,  
Jimmy Schuyler, Kenward Elmslie, Frank Lima,  
Bill Berkson, Joe Ceravolo, Ted Berrigan,  
Allan Kaplan, Ron Padgett, Dick Gallup, Larry Fagin,  
Peter Schjeldahl, Joe Brainard, John Giorno, Anne Waldman,  
Michael Brownstein, Lewis Warsh, David Shapiro, and I  
chartered a bus,  
and went to visit the Hart Crane monument in Cleveland.

We returned on April 24th, refreshed, amused, and ready to write.  
The budding plants and flowers, after their endless  
absence during the harsh winter, gave us all  
the feeling of being in love for the first time.  
That is, after the harsh winter  
of white snow and cold wandering visions,  
as the windows rattled in the wind, when the floors  
creaked in the midst of our pondering memories and complaints,  
and when from the pitch of a snowy night the furious wolf,  
dripping blood from the gaping jar of his mouth,  
pacing the shelves in flames,  
reminded us of the terrible days of Hart Crane,  
when people were not as kind to poets as they are today.

## Poem for Bontecou Etchings

All the while the green and white of our sentiment  
drifts on the sea,  
or as an element of the earth  
is with the oil born a million years ago  
which we bring up with endless minerals.  
Around the room is the lake, the sun  
lifting the vacant hand  
and everything is in you,  
the breeze of a September hitting your throat,  
incompetent personnel bathing your thoughts,  
and animals useful as food or pets,  
their ancient power looking on from a height or a distance,  
teeth from the sky and from the ground closing  
after the length of time which is truly yours.

## Ode

An Arcadian breeze from the southwest  
holds the shimmering spoon of today  
in 80 degrees, and it is certain  
even in water, the ocean of summer,  
that like your predecessors and with their civilized grief  
that you live in the sky, among fish,  
Romantic graphics, and the earliest airplanes,  
that there is no ventilation in our wool of 1870 July,  
that barrels horses and sweat appear along lower Broadway  
to expire in the streets with 19th-century expansion;  
where else can one conceive stupendous odes but in the sky  
and take responsibility for the sea, the sky,  
and our distribution among the species;  
where else do you hear with composure  
the screams of memorable adventures  
from far below in the century's night  
whose beauty you evade to capture;  
a condition understood when you first spoke,  
in post-Depression Manhattan, taken to the suburbs  
to continue speaking, with a sense of the Dionysian air  
refining your words at this later date  
when it is a great odyssey to read and write,  
to be flattered by the enjambments of contracts Ron  
and David's anthology and Paul Carroll's and as it is water  
here in the sky it is also the grass, eternal blanket,  
that you face staring up, incredible glance, or looking beneath.



## Notes on Velázquez

*for Irving and Lucy Sandler*

“My career has been spent as a courtier,  
and as a familiar of the court and the king.  
I am Velázquez.  
It is difficult to explain myself:  
Caravaggio is a buffoon,  
my six-year-old son could do better.”

“Ah, yes, Velázquez. When I am admiring his work  
I feel this twinge of impatience;  
there are so many improvements to make  
I do not know where to begin.  
I am Manet. Everything  
is hopeless in this miserable century.”

“When Manet comes floating up  
to our great studio in the sky,  
I will give him a sound thrashing.”  
Signed, Rubens, 1862.

## **Scenes from the Life of Christ**

Saint John goes to the field, in blue and gray,  
the colors of the American Civil War.

God remains above, in blood red and gold: blood red  
to remind us of our mortality.

Air comes through the grate in a steady flow.

Christ is triumphant.

People surround Christ Triumphant.

I have made their faces beet red.

I am the salt air and the dazzling sunshine.

## Voice, 1968

Turbulent specks swimming for six informative years,  
chops and lines in the stomach and dreams,  
rosé waterfall splashing the lines and the floor,  
the fog of the five boroughs you waited for,  
a November Wordsworth glaze of starry Vermont,  
under the protective wings of arcs of fiery leaves.  
Also disgusted, and numbed by the smoke of combatants,  
pressed by attacks of germs and dust  
or throbbing pains in the blood.

But perhaps you liked some of it very much,  
comparing it here in transient bloom  
to a youthful stumbling Paradise Lost,  
short not only of cashable greenbacks,  
but the wind denying the lungs  
of spiritual things as well: gasping ethereal frogs,  
chips of ancient tile and civilized pottery,  
which can make shopping and spending more enjoyable.

One cannot know what I mean, and sincerity  
enters as fashion biting its nails  
and tribal rhetoric waits in the wings.  
Cruel time waits further on with ridiculous simplicity,  
and the melancholy ship you chose  
at the fork of the earth,  
whether it is you meaning myself  
or the you of a timeless thought,  
carries you unimportant and forgetful in the water.

Coleridge has told you how poignantly he felt,  
and so have I;  
I have never known anyone, not for a second,  
a finger going off from the rest,  
an arm thread by thread in the same way,  
the vanishing trip which makes up my life.

## Poem

I am the friend of South America;  
I grew to like it enormously,

and then reached out across the oceans  
to the rest of the continents,  
getting to know many more places and people.

I had the best sense of humor in South America,  
but life has forced me with its disappointments  
into bitterness and idiocy.

## Sleep and Poetry

Tempted successfully to talk in the morning      *ô rage*  
*ô désespoir*  
*ô délices      ô bergères*  
already from an afternoon  
limp and limpid in the shoals of repose  
of bemusing crowds and currents with which to subject myself  
direct and imagining  
toward yet a 21<sup>st</sup> refreshment of the Christian era.  
I disappear into the reaches of what I think I am doing,  
stretched on its mossy banks in diaphanous oblivion  
away from the mountainous stellar structures  
which confine the newest materials  
tied in aluminum weights to the furious morning brain,  
as bellowing anarchy beats its skull  
on the quaking cement of the city  
and roots and herbs wait beneath for a crack; personae  
watch from the fire escape and look once more at the sky,  
subjected to the peculiarities of their drowsy creator  
who has fled from the previous day  
as a man waves to a train from a train,  
protected from the exertion of stopping;

I arrive with the years of my sleep  
past the age of Keats's conclusion,  
radiant with nervousness and Hyperion's weight,  
refusing forever the wishfulness of the visual,  
and suddenly consumed by a great sadness  
as precious autobiographical moments are wasted  
and the blood pumped into the anguished perception  
brings the anticipation of night and the closing door. There is,  
as I remember, a resistance to the silence of the bed,  
to the lilacs and privet  
which will presently bloom at the corners of the wool,  
suspending the animal activity in the room,  
until released to an interesting and serious province  
with a random similarity to the sublime.  
Planes go by in the dark.  
Figures emerge from the closet  
and I withdraw to allusion or awake in horror  
to skim the oxygen from the air,  
an element of which I am composed  
and is common to everyone, like a suitcase.  
I try in vain to ignore the successes of the visual,

I who know so many excellent painters,  
except that at night with my work the door is a blinding crack  
and for seconds I am close to a rich and starless destination.

The daily search for the lyric concludes the night  
and painterly haystacks dot the distant imperial blue of awakening;  
or one can remember that life can be terrible,  
shaving with incompetence in the diminutive maturity of morning.  
But I am alive and awake and see things clearly with a glance.  
There is no door because it is not in the picture  
but there are numerous windows in the clouds of life  
and there is the liquid of my contemplating brain;  
it thanks you for my contemporary adventure,  
when I look off with inspiration and forget who I am;  
our incongruities are passed on to our children,  
a line of sorrowful trees awaits them in their books

but the voiceless sublime will accept my invitation at last

its excess, its assistance  
which the milling public  
nor you nor any discovering person  
has ever seen but reeling with desire.